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SUBJECT: FROM COMITY TO CALUMNY: SRI LANKAN POLITICAL PARTIES BACK TO TRADING ACCUSATIONS IN THE MEDIA

Classified by: James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission for reasons 1.4, (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Six weeks after the tsunami that devastated the coasts of Sri Lanka, the main political parties have fallen back into their previous pattern of exchanging accusations and denunciations in the media. This return to fractiousness has dissolved the relative comity that prevailed immediately following the tsunami, when both the ruling and opposition parties, as well as the LTTE, used the media to call for unity and cooperation in the emergency relief effort. Whether this sniping indicates a return to "politics as usual," or simply reflects the tensions that have inevitably arisen in the face of the enormous reconstruction task, remains to be seen.
End summary.

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Media mudslinging re-emerges
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¶2. (C) Six weeks from the tsunami, Sri Lanka's main political parties - following a two-week hiatus immediately after the disaster -- have once again turned to the media to trade accusations and snipe at each other. In just the latest example of such infighting, the government-owned Daily News led February 8 with two front-page articles critical of the opposition United National Party (UNP). The first ran a headline quoting an obscure local UNP politician saying that "80 percent of UNP'ers not with leader," referring to former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The second story detailed a laundry list of criticisms against the UNP by pro-United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) academics under the header "Academics criticize UNP's 15 point National Policy." The article described the UNP's reconstruction plan as a "fairy tale composed to lure the masses."

¶3. (C) Another recent example was the exchange of charges published in the pro-government Daily News and the pro-UNP Daily Mirror over Wickremesinghe's recent visit to Europe. The Daily News fired the first salvo February 2 in a front-page article entitled: "Betrayal - Ranil in Norway in attempt to prevent disaster aid to Lanka." The story alleged that the former PM had traveled to Norway in a bid to stop disaster assistance from reaching Sri Lanka, ostensibly to gain political mileage and force the GSL to agree to the LTTE's interim aid mechanism.

¶4. (U) The UNP countered on February 4 in the independent Daily Mirror with: "Meetings meaningless if state media continue abuses: UNP." The article recapped an official letter to the President by UNP deputy leader Karu Jayasuriya in which he described the Daily News piece as "baseless and mischievous" and dismissed the allegations as "fanciful assertions." The Daily News' riposte arrived in a front-page article February 4 quoting Media Minister Mangala Samaweera rebuking the UNP as "provoking the masses through several media institutions partial to them."

¶5. (C) The government-owned Sunday Observer of February 6 kept up the pressure on the UNP over the weekend with an op-ed entitled "UNP in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde role," as well as an inside article on Wickremesinghe's Norway visit in which prominent Buddhist leaders described the alleged double-dealing of the UNP as "a national betrayal," a "childish and opportunist act," and a "despicable act of betrayal for political gain." The state-run media continued their offensive against the UNP on February 7 with a front-page article titled: "Ranil's Brussels statement misleading." The piece reproduced a GSL media release concerning duty free concessions, stating, in part: "It is regrettable that Mr. Ranil Wickremesinghe should think it fit to take credit for an initiative in which he played no part." On February 9 the independent Daily Mirror highlighted tensions between the Marxist-oriented Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and President Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) over what the JVP said was a lack of consultation on tsunami relief, with the JVP refusing to participate in Parliamentary debate today on

that issue.

16. (C) In another example of the recent acrimony, the JVP has used the media to criticize their coalition partner President Kumaratunga. For instance, on February 1 the Mirror headlined: "UNP offers support if JVP pulls out," and subheaded: "JVP fires tough letter to CBK (Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga)." That same day, the independent Island subheaded "JVP wants CBK to stop questionable aid inflow." The Tamil media has also weighed in with criticisms of late - On February 7, independent Tamil daily Thinakkural reported: "The President should throw away the JVP and come forward to work with the UNP - TNA MP Raviraj." The same day, pro-LTTE Tamil daily Sudar Oli: "The government is on a different stand regarding the common mechanism on relief and rebuilding and wasting time with useless proposals - LTTE," quoting Tiger political chief S.P. Thamilchelvam.
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Public calls for unity
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17. (C) The current return to political sniping in the media contrasts with the period immediately following the tsunami, when the Sri Lankan media carried repeated public

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calls by the government, the opposition, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to come together for the common good of the country. Photos of President Kumaratunga together with Wickremesinghe featured prominently in the state-run media during this time, as did photos of the President shaking the hands of two female Tiger cadres at a rehabilitation center in the east. The government-owned Sinhala daily Dinamina bannered on December 30: "A time we should forget differences and act in unison-President Kumaratunga" as well as "UNP will cooperate in rehabilitating the disaster victims." Independent Sinhala daily Divaina of the same day led with: "The Sinhalese, Tamils or Muslims cannot stand alone after this disaster- President Kumaratunga." During this period, the LTTE also weighed in, with Tiger political leader S.P. Thamilchelvam stating in independent Tamil daily Thinakkural December 31: "Tigers are ready to join with the government to wipe out the distress of the people."

18. (C) Editorial comment during this period also emphasized the (apparent) political harmony: under the header "Natural disasters and political divisions" Thinakkural, on January 3, stressed the need for GSL-LTTE cooperation in aid efforts, as did Divaina of the same day, headlining "North and East: hands of friendship extended." The state-run Daily News commented on January 6: "Selflessness - a crying need" in which it called for politicians to "set aside their differences in light of the crying need of the country."

19. (C) Comment: In the days following the tsunami, many pundits and analysts of Sri Lankan politics wondered if the tragedy might display a silver lining in the rapprochement of formerly feuding political parties and cooperation between the government and the LTTE. While there has been some cooperation in relief efforts between the latter two, particularly on the local level, the increasing appearance of sometimes strident criticism in the media among all political actors does not lend much hope for any further cooperation in tsunami recovery. End Comment.

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